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ABSTRACT

Textbook presentations of Asch's classical research were used as a case example to evaluate whether an anti-group bias exists in social psychology. Ninety-nine textbooks were analyzed to evaluate whether an overemphasis on conformity was presented by textbook descriptions of Asch, and whether independence and resistance to group pressure were minimized. The results indicated that authors tended to distort Asch's study in line with the hypothesis and that this tendency has increased dramatically with time. Contrary to expectation, an increasing number of textbooks mention that Asch's social support variation "reduced" conformity, but failed to stress that the power of the group was very much depleted with the support of only one other. The results were discussed in relation to an anti-group bias in social psychology and the impact this has on social psychology. The study concludes with an extensive list of references. (Author/IM)

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THE ASCH CONFORMITY STUDY AS AN EXAMPLE OF THE ANTI-GROUP BIAS IN SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

Textbook presentations of Asch's classical research were used as a case example to evaluate whether an anti-group bias exists in social psychology. Ninty-nine textbooks were analyzed to evaluate whether an overly conformity emphasis was presented by textbook descriptions of Asch, and whether independence and resistance to group pressure was minimized. The results indicated that authors tended to distort Asch's study in line with the hypothesis and that this tendency has increased dramatically with time. Contrary to expectation, an increasing number of textbooks mention that Asch's social support variation "reduced" conformity, but failed to stress that the power of the group was very much depleted with the support of only one other. The results were discussed in the context of an anti-group bias in social psychology and the implication this has for social psychology to be useful.

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between the individual and the group remains a critical issue in social psychology. This issue, however, has evaluative implications in so far as connotations attached to these concepts can affect the course of theory and research (Gergen, 1973). In Western thought the rational, autonomous individual is assumed to be the cultural ideal (Sampson, 1977, 1978, Bramel & Friend, 1982) and group influence is perceived as a negative force on the individual. Gustave Le Bon, a founder of European Social Psychology, wrote that "isolated he may be a cultivated individual, in a crowd, he is a barbarian - that is, a creature acting by instinct" (1895, p. 33). In America, the concept of individualism has been used to support competitive capitalism (Lukes, 1973). Floyd Allport (1924, 1933) during the post World War I period, began a crusade against the group concept and promoted an individualistic social psychology. Indeed, his anti-group bias was so strong that he even misanalyzed and misinterpreted his own social facilitation research, which he believed had shown that groups lowered thought processes (Bramel & Friend, 1979). His brother, Gordon Allport, also steeped in individualism and anti-group bias, presented a view of social psychology whose mission, he believed, was to accumulate a body of scientific knowledge that would help the individual resist the negative aspects of the group. Writing during the Mc Carthy period, Allport believed that the evils of both Hitler and Marx were based in their common heritage in Hegelian

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(group) theory. (G. Allport, 1954 p. 34).

The 1930's and the World War II period saw a softening of the anti-group bias in social psychology. The depression had made it necessary for working people to resist economic exploitation and it was by collective rather than individual action that this occurred. Similarly, the rising tide of fascism could not be attacked by separately acting individuals. The view that collective action could be rational and necessary became generally accepted (cf. Back, 1979). In this period, the Gestalt psychologies of Sherif, Lewin, and Asch were developed which saw social and group action as having a rational basis, and that the individual depended on the social context for an adequate world view. In a variety of ways, Lewin and his students showed that groups could be a positive and practical instrument of change and that in some cases, as in attitude change, they could be more effective than individualistic methods (Lewin, 1947). It may very well be, as Steiner (1974) has accutely observed and described, that in times of tranquility the emphasis in social psychology is on the individual, but that the 1930 - 1940's were times of social conflict when attention became focused on groups (cf. Bramel & Friend, 1981). Subsequently, as the Mc Carthy period emerged, Lewin's social psychology of group dynamics was attacked as being undemocratic (Kariel 1956, Gunderson, 1951a, 1951b) and his students quickly retreated to the safety of the laboratory to pursue more individualistic theory and research (Bramel & Friend, 1983). According to Nelson & Kannenberg (1976), who examined references in the Handbook of Social Psychology (2nd ed), in order to survey

changes in the field of social psychology from 1953 to 1967, the emphasis on theory and methodology was increased, while attention to groups steadily decreased.

Current undergraduate students of psychology are usually introduced to the topic of social psychology with a vivid and dramatic presentation of the research of Asch, (1951, 1952, 1955, 1956), Milgram, (1963, 1974), and Latane and Darley (1970). The collective impact of this research often serves to reinforce the prevailing assumption that groups or institutions are "bad" for people, that is, in the presence of others, individuals typically bend the truth (Asch), hurt innocent people, (Milgram) and fail to come to the assistance of those in distress (Latane and Darley). A corollary of this negative view of social influence is that the solitary individual who resists group pressure acts heroically and rationally, in a manner consistent with his/her own values and beliefs. Thus, in Asch, Milgram, and Latane and Darley, in the absence of others, the individual states what is actually seen, refuses to hurt innocent others, and is more likely to help others in distress. This string of "conformity" research can thus give the impression that groups are bad for individuals, that collective social action of a positive nature does not exist, and that it is only isolated individuals who act rationally and positively. At the same time, the beneficial aspects of social support and the liberating effects of groups may have been understated or even neglected in textbook renditions.

It is our purpose to take Asch's research and determine

whether textbook writers have presented an anti-group perspective in describing his classical studies on "conformity." Textbook accounts of research may be a good "Rorschach Test" for studying value biases in social psychology since writers have to communicate the relevance of their work to others, and therefore indicate the value they see in their work for society (Mills, 1943, Gramel & Friend, 1980). Asch's study is among the major ones used by textbook writers to introduce the student to social psychology. Of the ninty-nine social psychology textbooks we reviewed, we found only a few which failed to mention this classical work.

Solomon Asch (1951, 1952, 1955, 1956, 1961) was one of the first social psychologists to be concerned with the conditions that lead to independence and yielding when subjects are confronted with an arbitrary group opposition. Though Asch's research has been portrayed as concerned with "conformity," in actuality he was at least, if not more, interested in the conditions determining resistance to group pressure. The word conformity hardly appeared in his writings and his major report included independence in it's title. The following quote from Asch (1952) summarizes the assumptions he says motivated him to become involved in the study of social influence:

> "Current thinking has stressed the power of social conditions to induce psychological changes arbitrarily. It has taken slavish submission to group forces as the general fact and has neglected or implicitly denied the capacities of men for independence, for rising under certain conditions above group passion and prejudice" (Asch, 1952, p.451).

Asch conducted three basic experiments in which a lone stu-

dent was confronted by a majority of seven to nine fellow college students. All but one of these students were preinstructed confederates of the experimenter. Asch's studies did not control for the degree of acquaintance between subjects and confederates; in some of the experimental studies, the members of the majority included friends of the lone subjects. Subjects were told that they were participating in an experiment involving visual discrimination and asked to compare the lengths of lines on two large white cards. One card contained a single vertical black line and another card contained three vertical black lines of different lengths, with one being equal in length to the single line on the other card. Each student was asked to decide and announce publicly which one of the comparison lines was equal to the single line. There were eighteen sets of standard and comparison lines in which twelve were "critical" trials, and the remaining six were "neutral" trials on which the majority responded correctly. In order to establish some trust in the procedure, Asch used the "foot-in-the door" technique in which the first two responses of the confederates were veridical, and concurred with the subject's perception. These were followed by four more "correct" responses intermixed among the remaining critical trials. The subject always occupied a seat near the end of the row, usually one seat from the end, and therefore received the full impact of the majority response before giving his response.

There are basically two ways that Asch measured his dependent variable. The first measure, which was the primary way of reporting the results, was simply to count the proportion of

yielding and independent responses across subjects. Since there were twelve critical trials, and therefore the possibility of twelve errors, it was possible to determine what percentage of all responses were errors or correct, and the mean number of errors. The second method did not look at the number of reponses but examined the percentage of subjects who "yielded" or "remained independent" according to various criteria. It is this second measure, which we discuss below, that has been a source of considerable confusion. Asch, however, did not use this latter measure as his primary one to reflect the degree of yielding or independence. He was only secondarily interested in the psychological processes underlying individual differences. His main interest was in how certain situational factors affect an individual's behavior.

Asch found that one-third of the responses in the experimental condition were yielding ones, whereas two-thirds of the responses remained independent in spite of considerable group pressure. Approximately twenty-five percent of the subjects remained completely independent, while five percent went with the erroneous judgments of the majority without exception. When the group's unanimity was broken and subjects made judgments with a supporting partner, the ability of the group to extract erroneous judgments was effectively undermined. The frequency of errors in the direction of the majority dropped from 33 percent to 5.5 percent. There was also a dramatic increase in the percentage of independent subjects; overall 67 percent of the subjects remained completely independent.

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Despite the fact that a large amount of yielding was observed, more so than Asch had expected, the dominant response was still independence, and the partner condition showed that the individual is no longer vulnerable with a minimum of social support.

The purpose of the content analysis was to determine whether social psychology textbooks have accurately represented Asch's results or whether they have emphasized the negative consequences of group influence by stressing instances of conformity and minimizing the forms of independence.

METHOD

Selection of Texts

A content analysis of 99 Social Psychology textbooks published between 1953 and 1984 was conducted. Sociology social psychology textbooks, texts published in other countries, handbooks, and edited books of readings were excluded.

According to Gibson & Higbee (1980), there were 59 first edition social psychology textbooks published between 1953 and 1977. Fifty-four of these books (92%) were obtained. An additional 60 textbooks were obtained from three New York university libraries and faculty offices for a grand total of 114 textbooks (Appendix A). Of these 114 textbooks, 15 were excluded from the analysis; seven of these (identified by *), did not mention Asch's studies, and eight books (identified by **), were reprints of books having an original printing date prior to 1953. Thus, our final sample consisted of 99 social Psychology textbooks, all judged as representative of textbooks used in psychologically oriented social psychology courses. Included among the 99 texts were 36 revised editions. Although this creates some redundancy in the content analysis, many of the texts were substantially changed, justifying their inclusion. Among the 99 textbooks analyzed, 8 were published between 1953 and 1964; 36 between 1965 and 1974, and 55 between 1975 and 1984. Since Asch's research was first published in 1951, we felt that books published in 1953 had sufficient time to incorporate this research into their textbooks. Overall, we feel confident in having procured nearly all

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social psychology texts available by mid 1984.

Content Analysis

Five basic issues of Asch's studies were identified for analysis. The first analysis assessed books straightforwardly according to five different categories concerning the frequency of yielding and independent responses - Asch's main dependent variable. Books falling into the first category reported, as Asch did, that approximately 67% of the stated judgments were independent and 33% were yielding. Books falling into the next two categories only presented one of these findings, that is, that 33% of the responses were incorrect or that 67% of the responses were independent. Though 67% correct is the logical obverse of 33% errors, it was felt that those authors who made a point of mentioning that "67% of the judgments were correct" were more likely to present the results and interpretations as Asch had done, focusing on the amount of independence as well as yielding. The fourth category included books which failed to mention the overall results characterized by frequency of responses. The fifth category included books where the frequency of responses finding was confused with counts of "yielders" and "non-yielders" as persons as well as books giving inaccurate information. Books falling into the sixth and final category did not present the percentage of erroneous or correct responses.

The second analysis determined what was stated about the percentage of subjects who yielded or remained independent. Unlike the first analysis which simply involved the tabulation of the statistics 33% or 67%, there were numerous variations in the

reporting of independent or yielding subjects. Out of the 99 texts there were 42 different variations in the reporting of individual differences! Since it was not feasible to have this many categories, these renditions were classified according to the following five categories. The first category included books which did not emphasize one "type" of subject over another, as exemplified by Klineberg (1954):

> Some of these critical subjects remained entirely independent of the group; at the other extreme there were some who agreed with the majority in every case (p. 210).

Books falling into the second category emphasized the existence of yielding subjects, an example of which is found in Secord & Backman (1974):

> Most persons placed in these circumstances felt great pleasure to disregard their own perceptions and to conform to the rest of the group by choosing answers that seemed obviously wrong (p. 304).

McGinnies (1970) provides an example of books falling into the third category which emphasize the existence of independent subjects:

> There were extreme individual differences among the naive subjects. About one fourth rendered correct judgments on all of the trials, despite the fact that they were in disagreement with every other member of the group (pp. 145-146).

Books falling into the fourth category gave confusing accounts of this aspect of Asch's findings, an example of which is provided by McDavid & Harari (1968), who confuse the frequency of responses with percentages of subjects who yielded or remained independent.

> When the judgment of the confederate subject was unanimously incorrect, about 37 percent of the 123 subjects erred by compromising, or yielding to the group's incorrect judgment (p. 322).

Books failing to mention this aspect of Asch's finding fell into the fifth category.

Since many textbooks reported misleading and vague statements such as "75% conformed at least once" or "most subjects conformed at least once," textbooks reporting such statements, in addition to being placed in one of the above categories, were tabulated in order to determine how prevalent such statements were. Textbooks were also tabulated with regard to whether authors mentioned or did not mention the existence of completely independent subjects.

A third analysis simply counted whether writers mentioned that a) subjects and confederates were acquainted, and b) the existence of neutral trials on which the confederates had given correct answers. Writers stressing unthinking conformity might overlook these situational factors about the experimental procedure in their textbook accounts.

Finally, the textbook accounts were assessed according to what they mentioned about social support, in order to determine

in how much detail this aspect of Asch's experiment was reported.

The textbook renditions were assessed by the first author. In order to check on the reliabilty, every other textbook, taken chronologically (n=49), was evaluated by a second rater who was blind to the hypotheses of the study. Percentage agreements ranged from 82% to 96%.

RESULTS

Frequency of Errors:

The first analysis compared textbook renditions to determine how many mentioned both the proportion of errors and correct responses as Asch had done in his studies.

Insert Table 1 about here

Summing the last three categories, we see that twenty-five percent did not mention, or mentioned inaccurately, what Asch considered to be his major finding. Only 17 percent reported both the 33% erroneous response and the 66 percent independent responses, as Asch had done. A good example of judicious reporting is Newcomb, Turner & Converse's Social Psychology, (1965):

> "Approximately one third of all their judgments were errors identical with or in the direction of the planned errors of the majority. Since control groups showed virtually no error in this situation, it was clear that the errors resulted primarily from the unanimous majority. At the same time, the influence of the majority was far from complete, since about two-thirds of all estimates were correct despite the majority verdict" (p. 239).

The greatest percentage of accuracy in reporting Asch's main findings in this manner occurred during the early time period (1953-1964) with then a steady decline (Figure 1).

Insert Figure 1 about here

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while twenty-five percent of textbooks falling into the time period 1953 to 1964 reported that sixty-seven percent of the responses were correct and independent of the majority and that 33% were erroneous, only 19 percent of textbooks from 1965 to 1974 and fourteen percent of textbooks from 1975 to 1984 report Asch's main findings in this manner. Consistent with this trend of decreasing accuracy over time, was the finding of a sharp increase in the number of textbooks reporting only that thirty-three percent of the responses were erroneous. Fifty-seven percent failed to mention the predominant response - accurate reporting by Asch's subjects - and instead mentioned only that thirty-three percent were errors. While only twenty-five percent of texts published between 1953 and 1964 report Asch's findings in this manner, fifty percent of textbooks from 1965 to 1974 and sixty-five percent of textbooks from 1975 to 1984 mention conformity only. Characteristic of these reports is the neglect to mention that the majority of estimates, that is 66%, were correct in the face of considerable group pressure. A typical description of this mode of reporting can be found in Freedman, Carlsmith & Sears (1970) Social Psychology:

> "The results did not support Asch's prediction. Even in this restricted situation, there was a great deal of conformity. Over many experiments and many trials within each experiment, subjects conformed on about 35 percent of the trials. That is, about 35 percent of

> the time they went against their own senses and gave the answer favored by the rest of the group" (p. 216).

It could be argued that if a textbook writer reports "33% conforming responses" that also emphasizing that 67% of the responses were independent in unnecesary. Yet, neglecting to mention that the predominant tendency was resistance to group pressure is likely to lead to an overemphasis of conformity, particularly when the chapter or topic heading is "Conformity." That eighteen percent of the textbook writers, like Asch, felt it was necessary to mention <u>both</u> the degree of yielding and independence suggests that these authors were sensitive to the need to clearly communicate that considerable conformity and resistance were observed. Comparison of the previously cited quotes by Newcomb et al, who mention both statistics, and Freedman et al. who only mentions conformity, points to the very different impact that the description of the same results may have.

Clearly the tendency of texts to emphasize conformity and to ignore mentioning explicitly that the majority of responses were resistant to group pressure. Stotland & Canon (1972) particularly, present the draconian consequences of conformity:

> "This self-doubt, and its complement perception of the group as expert, may become so great that the individual may begin to conform to the group, to publicly state for example that a line that is shorter than another is really the same length. In fact, Asch found that over 30 percent of the subjects' answers were erroneous ones in agreement with the group! Interestingly enough, in subsequent studies on the same problem, the percentage appears to remain around 30 percent! Furthermore, 58 percent of the subjects made two or more conforming judgments in a series of trials. Asch has, in a small way, created an Orwellian world in which long is short; the frightening possibility of black being seen as white, good as bad, looms before our imaginations. The reader should not forget that

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> the subjects were students at colleges which are generally considered to have quite high standards" (p. 426).

Another sixteen percent of textbooks failed even to mention the overall results characterized by frequency of responses. These authors slipped into reporting conformity in terms of "percentages of subjects who conform." This measure, which can be so easily biased in the conformity direction, as will be discussed shortly, simplifies Asch's "contradictory" results, suppresses the degree of independent responses found, and itself "conforms" to topic or chapter heading which invariauly is "Conformity." Textbook writers who find it difficult to report "contradictory" results might resort to oversimplified accounts which suppress the degree of resistance observed.

Although three textbooks did not present any percentages of the frequency of responses, their description of these results varied. Sargent & Williamson (1966) state:

> The most frequent reaction was disbelief of their judgment and acceptance of the majority viewpoint; they reported only what the majority saw and did not accept their own visual experience (p. 371).

Finally, six texts confuse the frequency of responses with percentages of subjects who yielded or remained independent. An example of this muddled reporting is provided by Goldstein (1980):

> Asch found that nearly one-third (32 percent) of the subjects, when confronted with an incorrect judgment by all other group members, gave inaccurate judgments themselves (p. 330).

whereas Asch (1956) found that approximately 37% of the responses were erroneous, the above mentioned textbook writers state that 37% of the subjects yielded.

Individual differences:

Asch undertook a phenomenological analysis in order to understand the various psychological processes underlying individual differences in yielding and independence. Though this was his main purpose for categorizing subjects as "yielders" and "independent subjects," textbook writers have often used "the percentage who conformed" to indicate the general amount of conformity found in the Asch studies. Whereas the "percentages of errors" in the experimental condition (33%) is a very straightforward and unambiguous statistic, "the percentage who conform" is more ambiguous because it depends on what cut off point one uses. In Asch's main study (1956) of 123 male subjects, these results were reported quite unambiguously. Twenty-four percent remained completely independent; fifteen percent made 1-2 errors; fourteen percent made 3 errors; 11 percent made 4-5 errors; nine percent made 6-7 errors; fifteen percent made 8-9 errors; eight percent made 10-11 errors; and five percent yielded all the time. These results clearly indicate that there were many more completely independent subjects than completely yielding ones. In fact the ratio of those who remained completely independent to those who yielded is 5:1.

However, in contrast to these unambiguous results, we unexpectedly found forty-two different variations in the report of individual differences. Since it was not feasible to classify the ninty-nine textbooks into forty-two categories, they were assigned to five categories: those emphasizing the percentage of conforming subjects; those describing the existance of the per-

centage of both conforming and independent subjects; those mentioning only independent subjects; those neither mentioning the percentage of conforming or independent subjects, and those who confused percentage of conformers with percentage of errors.

Insert Table 2 about here

As shown in Table 2, nine percent of the textbooks did not present any statistics about individual differences. Another nine textbooks confused statistics concerning the percentage of conformers with the frequency of errors. Of the remaining eighty-one textbooks, thirty-four present the existance of both independent and yielding subjects. Five other texts emphasized only independence. Finally, forty-two of the textbooks emphasi zed conformity.

The results of two other independent analyses are consistent with the foregoing one. Textbooks were also analyzed with regard to whether authors mentioned or did not mention the existence of completely independent subjects. Asch had found that there were five times as many totally independent subjects as there were completely conforming subjects (24% vs. 5%). Of the thirty-nine books which emphasized conformity, twenty-five (59%) did not mention the existence of independent subjects, whereas of the thirty-four textbooks which emphasized both conformity and inde-

pendence, only 4 (12%) failed to mention the existence of completely independent subjects. It is interesting to note that of the twenty-five texts emphasizing conforming subjects, while failing to mention the existence of completely independent subjects, twenty-one were published between 1975 and 1984, while none were published between 1953 and 1970.

Insert Figure 2 about here

A second analyses pursued the method by which authors tended to suppress the existence of independent subjects and to magnify the number of conforming subjects. We previously referred to the ambiguity regarding the cut-off point in determining conformity or independence of subjects. A frequent oversimplified mode of representing Asch's main results, perhaps to dramatize or inflate the extent of conformity, has consisted of such statements as "75% of the subjects conformed at least once" or "the majority conformed at one time or another." For example Baron & Byrne (1977) state that "76% made at least one error by going along with the group (p. 258). These statements are particularly misleading because they lable as conformers and lump together with conforming subjects those who were primarily independent - for example, the 35 out of 123 subjects who were independent on nine, ten and eleven trials out of twelve. (Footnote: one could also present the obverse statistic, that is 95% of the subjects were

independent at least one of the times). Of the forty-two textbooks (Table 2) which were categorized as emphasizing conformity, twenty-nine made such statements, thereby oversimplifying and magnifying the extent of conformity found by Asch. Of these twenty-nine textbooks, the dominant description was the "75% conformed at least once" statement. Overall twenty-one of the thirty-nine texts emphasizing conformity used this description to describe Asch's results.

The individual difference results analyzed over time are also revealing, indicating considerable consistency with the frequency of errors analysis which showed an increase with time in emphasizing conformity. As Figure 3 shows the percentage of texts emphasizing conformity increases with time whereas those who mention both decreases (continuous lines). Further analyses of the texts which emphasize conformity indicate that this trend is almost entirely accounted for by the increasing use of "75% of the subjects conformed as least once" (see perforated lines). Also consistent with this trend in emphasizing conformity is that only forty-five percent of recent texts (1975-1984) acknowledge the existence of independent subjects compared with seventy-two percent and sixty-three percent in the middle and early periods.

Insert Figure 3 about here

Acquaintanceship and Neutral Trials:

Textbook writers necessarily have to be selective as to what details they include in summarizing any particular piece of research. Two features of the Asch study - and whether they are reported or not - have implications for whether the results are pandtrayed as indicating blind or irrational conformity or not. In Asch's experiments, the members of the majority were often friends or acquaintances of the subjects. In fact, Asch had asked members of the majority to recruit naive subjects. As such, subjects had little reason to distrust the majority who were often their friends or acquaintances. Subsequent research has shown that conformity to group norms is greated when individuals expect future interaction with the group members than when they do not (Lewis, Langan & Hollander, 1972, Raven, 1959). As such, Asch's subjects had no reason to question the good faith of the group, or the intentions of the majority, and this may have been an additional rational force accounting for some of the yielding. Failing to mention this feature of the study might also contribute to the notion that subjects were uncritically conforming.

Overall, ninty percent of the textbooks failed to mention this fact. Interestingly, another six percent volunteered the misinformation that subjects and confederates were not acquainted.

The failure to mention that subjects were often recruited by acquaintances by itself is not of critical import, but taken with

the failure to mention the inclusion of neutral trials might foster the belief that subjects were gliding through the trials blindly conforming.

Asch felt it advisable to include a number of neutral trials to which the majority responded correctly, because "we hoped that their inclusion would lend a quality of trustworthiness to the majority" (Asch, 1956, p. 7), and "in order to reduce the possibility that the naive subject will suspect collusion against him" (Asch, 1955, p.32). As previously mentioned, Asch's studies either included five neutral and seven critical trials, or 6 neutral and twelve critical trials. By failing to mention that the majority was correct on approximately 1/3 of the trials, textbook writers give the impression that subjects were slavishly submitting to obvious errors; more likely it is that subjects were confused by the contradictory behavior of the confederates. To mention that one-third of the trials were neutral is significant because it informs the reader that sometimes the confederates were reliable and accurate sources.

The following table provides a summary of these findings:

Insert Table 3 about here

The majority of texts (70%), failed to mention the correct number of neutral trials, thus adding to the stereotype of the conforming subject. Only 30% of textbooks declared the correct

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number of neutral and critical trials. An example of accuracy in reporting this aspect of Asch's study is presented from Tedeschi's & Lindskold's, (1976), Social Psychology: Interdependence, Interaction, and Influence:

> "Eighteen pairs of cards were presented to the group. On six of the trials, including the first two, the confederates made correct matches but on 12 of the 18 trials, beginning with the third, the confederates made incorrect but unanimous judgments. Hence, on 12 occasions, the subjects were faced with two facts: (1) six persons had publicly indicated agreement in their judgments, and (2) the judgments were apparently wrong" (p. 549).

An additional thirty-six textbooks fail to mention the exact number of neutral trials or mention the incorrect number of such trials. In addition to presenting the size of each experimental group erroneously, as well as the wrong number of total trials, Stotland & Canon, (1972), present the wrong number of neutral trials:

> "He assembles groups of approximately twelve college students..On each of twenty presentations of sets of lines, each of the students announced which he saw as the line of the same length... After the first two presentations, all the subjects except one, publicly made erroneous judgments" (p. 423).

That neutral trials existed is not even mentioned in twenty-three of the textbooks analyzed, and a further ten percent of textbooks only imply their existence.

Social Support:

Asch found that when the critical subject was with another individual who was not aware of the prearranged agreement with

the rest of the group, the frequency of errors dropped to 10.4%. When the partner was an instructed confederate of the experimenter, instructed to give the correct answer throughout, the frequency of errors dropped to 5.5%. In a subsequent variation, this "partner" was instructed to respond correctly for the first half of the experiment and then to "desert" to the majority. Apparently, the effect of having and then losing a partner increased the proportion of errors to 28.5% as opposed to the previous level of 5.5 percent. However, when the partner answered correctly for the first half and then left "to keep his appointment with the dean," independent responses were significantly increased. Asch then evaluated the consequences of gaining a partner and found that when the partner sided with the majority during the first six trials, and then "broke" away and gave the correct estimates, the level of yielding was reduced to 8.7%. A subsequent study evaluated the presence of a "compromise" partner" who always chose the line which was in-between the standard and the extreme. Asch found that although the majority of the errors were similar to the error of the partner, the frequency of the errors was not significantly reduced.

Asch concluded that the presence of a supporting partner had a significant effect:

> "it is clear that the presence in the field of one other individual who responded correctly was sufficient to deplete the power of the majority, and in some cases to destroy it" (Asch, 1951, p. 186).

However, our hypothesis that the social support results would be suppressed was not supported.

Insert Table 4 about here

Eighty-two percent of the texts mention social support (Table 4). Furthermore, with time, an increasing percentage of texts reported that conformity was reduced with social support (Figure 4).

Insert Figure 4 about here

Interestingly, five out of the eight textbooks in the early period (1954 - 1964) failed to mention anything about social support. Nevertheless, though eighty-three percent of the texts mentioned social support, most stressed the reduction of conformity and only mentioned social support briefly in passing. Few textbooks mentioned that with one other partner, resistance to group pressure was dramatically increased (cf. Willis & Leving, 1976). Only eight textbooks gave a detailed description of Asch's social support variations.

DISCUSSION

In his classical study on conformity Solomon Asch found, unexpectedly, large amounts of what he called yielding. However, the predominant response was still resistance to group pressure: two-thirds of the judgments remained independent. Furthermore, whether subjects yielded or resisted group pressure, Asch reported considerable conflict and stress. Yet most textbook writers have characterized the subjects as gliding through a series of trials slavishly conforming to external pressure and have minimized the extent of resistance found in the study. These trends seem to have increased with time often accompanied by glib statements such as "75% conformed at least one of the times."

Why then have textbook writers presented a picture of over-conformity? Several reasons can be put forward. First, what was new about what Asch found was not independence but the amount of conformity. Many authors dramatize this result by saying Asch was surprised by this unexpected finding. Another factor, perhaps parochial to social psychology teaching, is the need for writers to demonstrate to their readers the powerful effect of group and situational variables. Asch's study is a very convenient, clear and ostensibly unambiguous example of social psychology's subject matter. That nearly all social psychology texts (and numerous introductory texts) describe Asch's study in this context attests to this point. The considerable amount of conformity observed by Asch in the absence of material rewards or coercion is a vivid illustration of the powerful impact of other people on the individual. Presenting, in addition, the substan-

tial amount of independence and resistance might seem to confuse this picture. Authors have clearly opted for an oversimplified account which reports conformity to group pressure rather than the seemingly more contradictory and complex results found by Asch which would also include the substantial resistance to the majority.

A more important issue is whether the Asch work, as well as other studies, have been used as vehicles of an anti-group bias in academic social psychology (Steiner, 1974; Billig 1981). As with other value questions the answer may lie in the relation between social psychology and society. Individualism is no doubt a treasured value of American society (Pramel & Friend, 1982). Some (Lukes, 1973) have pointed out that individualism has developed strong roots in the United States because of the absence of a strong socialist tradition as in Europe. Within social psychology, Sampson, (1977, 1978) has argued that the ideal of the self-contained and self-sufficient autonomous individual pervades the theoretical constructs and that the individual who separates the self from the group embodies the cultural ideal. In this context, what is dramatic about Asch's finding is the implication it has for American character structure. It is perhaps shocking to Americans' conceptions of themselves that they in fact are not autonomous or individualistic as the ideal seems to suggest, but blindly, uncritically, and slavishly submit to the group.

This stereotypical view that subjects simply unthinkingly ease themseves through the experiment by conforming like sheep (a view not shared by Asch but presented by many authors) is abetted

by their neglect to mention some critical features of the experiments. Many authors failed to mention that one-third of the trials on which the confederates were correct were strategically embedded among two-thirds of the incorrect trials in order to obtain the trust of the subjects in the validity of the experimental situation. These conflicting signals from their confederates must have been bewildering for the subjects. Moreover, Asch had also asked confederates to secure subjects for the experiment and many of these were friends or acquaintances. Subjects thus came to the experiment probably without any reason to distrust them thus adding to the conflict. Some authors, in dramatizing the conformity results, even state incorrectly that the subjects had no reasonable fear of giving deviant responses because the others were strangers and they would not see them again. The omission of these features of the experiment by some authors encourages the view that the subjects were slavishly submitting and uncritically yielding to group pressure.

The fear that people will bow to group pressure and that this may characterize American society was dramatically highlighted during the Mc Carthy inquiries when many prominent individuals conformed to political and other pressure by cooperating in "naming names" before the House Committee on Unamerican Activity (Navasky, 1980). There was considerable fear during the 1950's about the alleged loss of individuality and concern about excessive conformity (Riesman, 1950; Packard, 1959; Whyte, 1956). The Asch study provided a vivid experimental verification for the current popular view that Americans had become a nation of con-

formers and that groups prevented individuals from accomplishing self-realization, freedom, and independence. Asch (1955) himself, perhaps unwittingly, contributed to this view in his popular Scientific American article in which, untypically, he (or the editor) stressed conformity, a term he ordinarily did not use, and minimized independence and social support found in his study. Moreover, in one of the captions to an illustration, he presented an accurate but oversimplified statistic that 75 percent of the subjects conformed "in various degrees" - a statistic which was picked up by several authors and subsequently popularized as "75 percent of the subjects conformed at least once."

By presenting Asch's work as an example of the weakness of the individual in the face of group pressure, the stereotype that groups are generally never good for people is reinforced. Western social science, since the French Revolution, is replete with examples of the irrationality of the individual in both groups and crowds (Le Bon, 1895; Freud, 1922; F. Allport, 1924; G. Allport, 1954). Textbooks often use Nietsche's quote, or such like, that "madness is the exception in individuals, but the rule in groups." Presentations of the forceful impact of the group such as the Asch, Milgram, and Latane and Darley research convey the image that groups nearly always tend to mislead the individual, forcing the individual to act contrary to his or her sentiments, or to behave irrationally. In this way groups may be seen as destroying individuality and are "undemocratic." Especially during the 1950's groups and group dynamics came under considerable criticism as being undemocratic, socialist, and subversive

(Gunderson, 1951a, 1951b, Kariel, 1956, cf. Cartwright & Lippitt, 1957, Bonner, 1959, Bramel & Friend, 1983).

By emphasizing the powerful but detrimental effect of the group on the individual, the discipline of social psychology may have inadvertently undermined the practical contribution and benefits that groups can have for individuals. It seems, because of the anti-group bias, that social psychology may have ceded the practical aspects of group activity to industrial psychology, social work, nursing, and sociology, where groups appear to be seen more positively and productive. Kurt Lewin's early work in social psychology was an attempt to demonstrate through empirical research, that democratically led groups, group membership, and democratic participation had positive material benefits for various practical issues in race and industrial relations and social change (Lewin, 1947, 1948).

Asch also believed that groups can make a positive contribution to the individual's interpretation of events, and social activity (Asch, 1952, Chapter 6). He repeatedly questioned the tendency for social psychology to equate "social influence" with "social constraint" (1951, 1952, 1955, 1956, 1959, 1961). He believed that the individual was weak without social support (Asch 1955, p.33). Isolated, the individual could resist, but with considerable stress and tension (cf. Bogdonoff et al. 1961), whereas with the social support of only one other person, resistance with considerably less tension did occur and the power of even the largest group could be very much depleted. The proliferation of self-help and social support groups during the past

decades, and even social movements, attest to the need for individuals to cooperate in satisfying their needs through groups and group action (Gartner & Riessman, 1977, Borman, 1982). Social psychology, by stressing the dangers of groups and social influence, may have drawn attention away from the cooperative and productive aspects of group interaction thus undermining it's potential to be useful. Presentation of Asch's work in this way may have contributed to this one-sided view of social influence.

Table 1: Textbook Presentations of Asch's Findings on Proportion of Errors/Correct Responses (N=99)

	Percentage of Textbooks
Mentions that 33% of all responses were incorrect and 67% were correct and independent	17.2
Mentions only the 33% conforming responses:	56.0
Mentions only the 67% accurate responses:	1.0
Frequency of responses finding not mentioned:	16.2
Frequency of responses confused with "percentage of subjects who conform.":	6.0
No errors/correct responses Given:	3.0
TOTAL	100%

Table 2. Individual Differences (N=99)

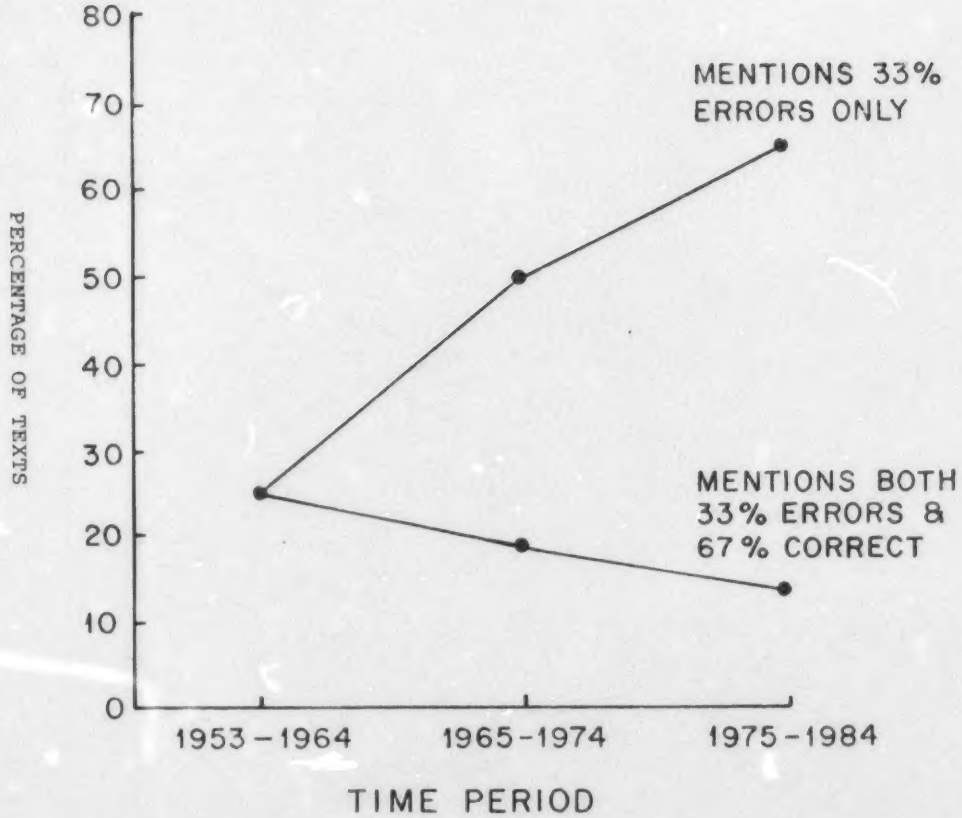
	Percentages of Texts
Main emphasis is on the number of "Conformers."	42.4
Existance of conforming and independent subjects without emphasis on either predominating:	34.3
Main emphasis on the number of "Independent Subjects."	5.0
Individual Differences not mentioned.	9.1
Individual differences confused with frequency of responses:	9.1
Total	99.9%

TABLE 3. Neutral Trials (N=99)

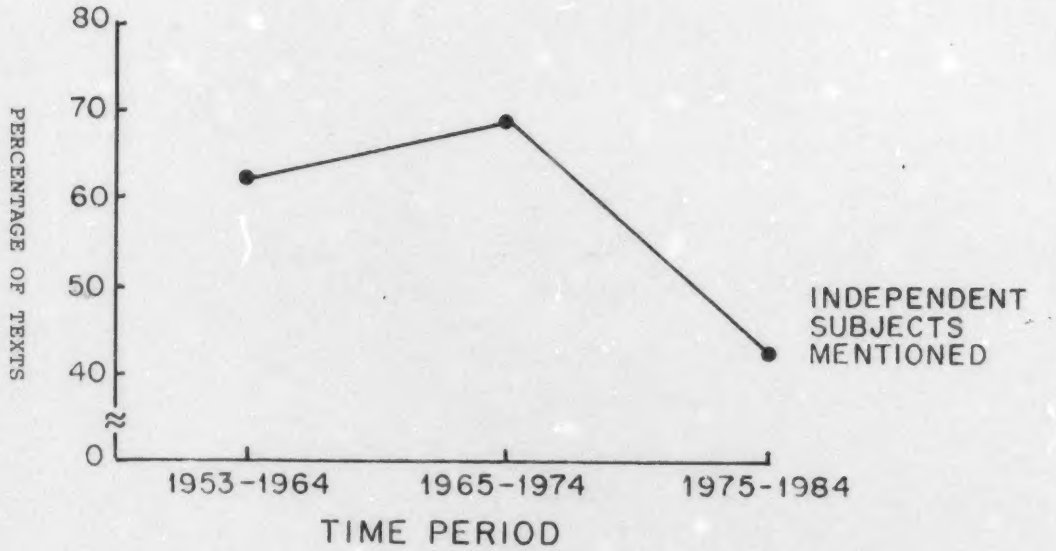
	Percentage of Texts
Neutral Trials not mentioned:	23.2
Neutral Trials only implied:	9.1
Neutral Trials stated - but not the exact number:	29.3
Neutral Trials stated - incorrect number:	8.1
Neutral Trials stated - correct number or percentage:	30.3
TOTAL:	100%

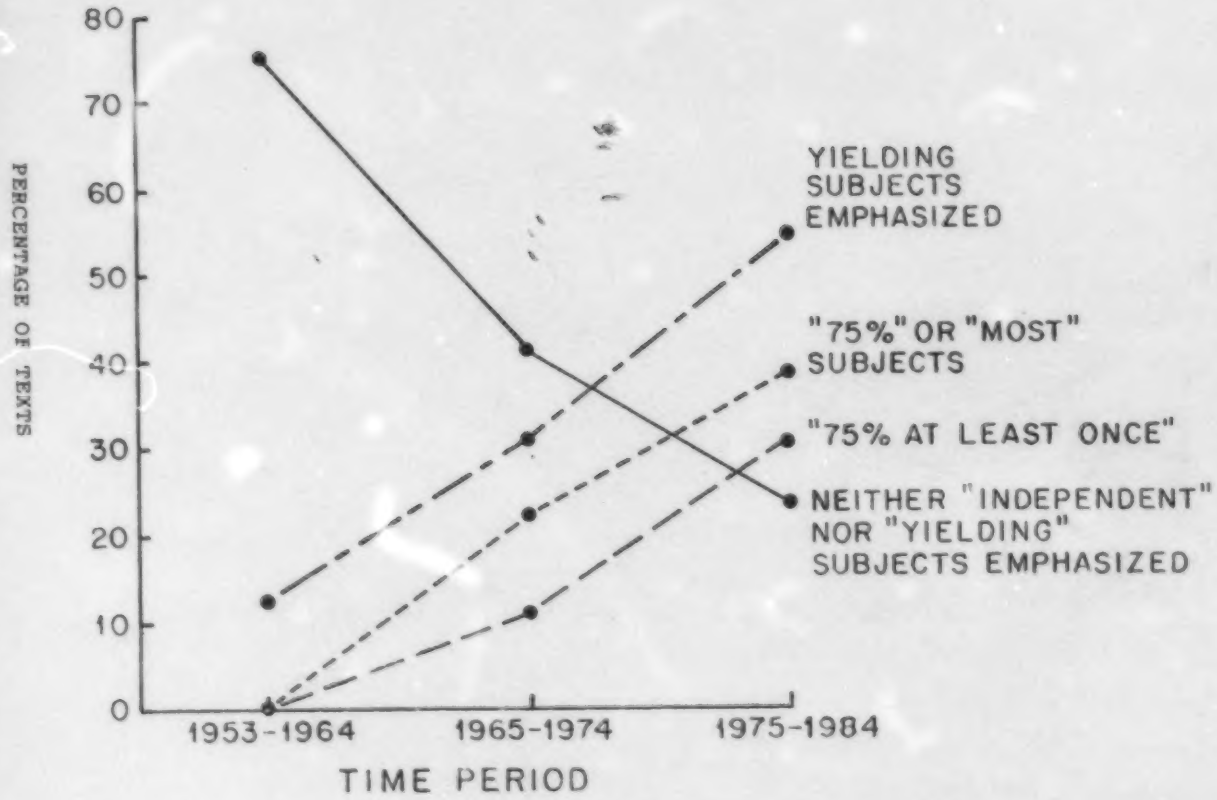
Table 4. Social Support (N=99)

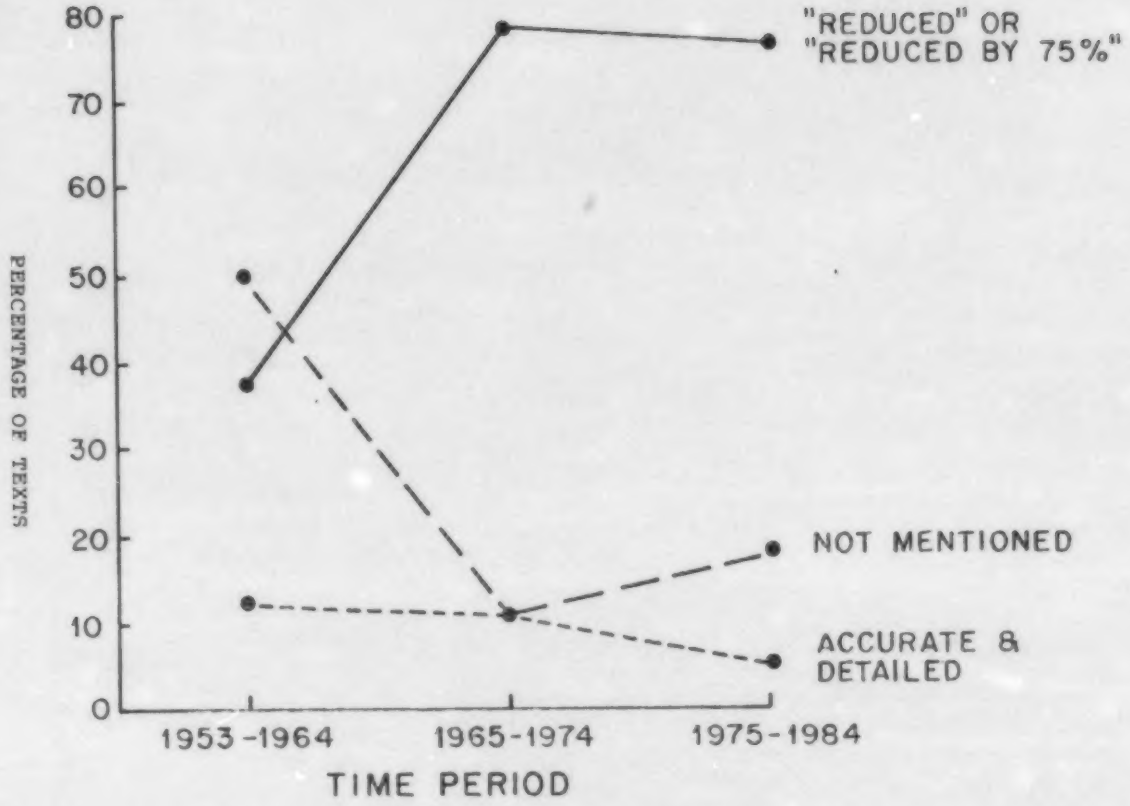
	Percentage of Texts
Detailed presentation of social support variations:	8.1
Mentions conforming responses were reduced by one quarter of the level:	38.4
Mentions conforming responses were reduced:	35.3
Not Mentioned:	18.2
TOTAL:	100%


80
70
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
PERCENTAGE OF TEXTS
MENTIONS 33% ERRORS ONLY
MENTIONS BOTH 33% ERRORS & 67% CORRECT
1953-1964
1965-1974
1975-1984
TIME PERIOD

36


80
70
60
50
40
0
PERCENTAGE OF TEXTS
1953-1964
1965-1974
1975-1984
TIME PERIOD
INDEPENDENT
SUBJECTS
MENTIONED


80
70
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
PERCENTAGE OF TEXTS
1953-1964
1965-1974
1975-1984
TIME PERIOD
YIELDING SUBJECTS EMPHASIZED
"75%" OR "MOST" SUBJECTS
"75% AT LEAST ONCE"
NEITHER "INDEPENDENT" NOR "YIELDING" SUBJECTS EMPHASIZED


80
70
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
PERCENTAGE OF TEXTS
"REDUCED" OR
"REDUCED BY 75%"
NOT MENTIONED
ACCURATE &
DETAILED
1953-1964
1965-1974
1975-1984
TIME PERIOD

39

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* Those books with an asterisk (*) following the date of publication were excluded from our analysis, because they were reprints of books published prior to 1952.

** Those books with two asterisks (**) following the date of publication were excluded from our analysis, because Asch was not mentioned.

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